THE PERFECT CRIME

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The `Laying-Off' of Desire

In facial features, sex, illnesses and death, identity is perpetually changing. This is the body as destiny, which has to be exorcized at all costs -- through the appropriation of the body as projection of self, the individual appropriation of desire, of one's appearance, one's image: cosmetic surgery on all fronts. If the body is no longer a site of otherness but of identification, then we have urgently to become reconciled with it, repair it, perfect it, turn it into an ideal object. Everyone treats their bodies the way men treat women in projective identification: they invest them as a fetish, making an autistic cult of them, subjecting them to a quasi-incestuous manipulation. And it is the body's resemblance to its model which becomes a source of eroticism and £white' seduction -- in the sense that it effects a kind of white magic of identity, as opposed to the black magic of otherness. [1]

This is how it is with body-building: you get into your body as you would into a suit of nerve and muscle. The body is not muscular, but muscled. It is the same with the brain and with social relations or exchanges: body-building, brainstorming, word-processing. Madonna is the ideal specimen of this, our muscled Immaculate Conception, our muscular angel who delivers us from the weaknesses of the body (pity the poor shade of Marilyn!).

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The sheath of muscles is the equivalent of character armour. In the past, women merely wrapped themselves in their image and their finery -- Freud speaks of those people who live with a kind of inner mirror, in a fleshly, happy self-reference. That narcissistic ideal is past and gone; body-building has wiped it out and replaced it with a gymnastic Ego-Ideal -- cold, hard, stressed, artificial self-reference. The construction of a double, of a physical and mental identity shell. Thus, in `body simulation', where you can animate your body remotely at any moment, the phantasy of being present in more than one body becomes an operational reality. An extension of the human being. And not a metaphorical or poetic extension, as in Pessoa's heteronyms, but quite simply a technical one. [2]

The contemporary individual is never without his clones -- reincarnation of the old fatality of incest, of the infernal cycle of identity which, at least in the fable, still had an air of tragic destiny to it but which, for us, is now no longer anything but the code of the automatic disappearance of the individual. We can't exactly even speak of individuals any longer. Individuation was part of the golden age of a subject-object dynamics. Since he has become truly indivisible, and has thus achieved his perfect -- that is to say, delirious, self-referential -- form, we cannot speak of the individual any longer, but only of the Selfsame and the hypostasis of the Selfsame. As is illustrated by the absolute, intransitive difference which marks the final point of that self-reference: `my', £your', `his or her' difference. The pure and simple appropriation of difference. Previously, it was at least the other who was taken to be different. Metastases of identity: all the particles disperse into individual histories. To each his cocktail, his own life story, all equivalent in their simultaneously differential and insignificant character. Each one defended by such a scrambling system that his voice, speech and face will soon be unrecognizable to the others, except to those who have a personal decoder -- including when making love: the body will materialize only for those who have the key to

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the decoder. Soon we shall all be decoding machines. Since every spontaneous relationship, every natural movement of desire, is laid off [*en chômage technique*], then the technical ritual will have to substitute for this `technically' unemployed desire.

Madonna Deconnection: [3] Madonna is `desperately' fighting in a world where there is no response -- the world of sexual indifference. Hence the urgent need for hypersexual sex, the signs of which are exacerbated precisely because they are no longer addressed to anyone. This is why she is condemned successively and simultaneously to take on all the roles and all the versions of sex (rather than the perversions), because for her there is no longer any sexual otherness, something which brings sex into play beyond sexual difference, and not just by parodying it wildly, but always from within. She is, in fact, fighting against her own sex; she is fighting against her own body. For want of some other who would deliver her from herself, she is unrelentingly forced to provide her own sexual enticement, to build up for herself a panoply of accessories -- in the event a sadistic panoply, from which she tries to

wrench herself away. Harassment of the body by sex, harassment of sex by signs.

It is said that she lacks nothing (this might be said of women in general). There are, however, different ways of lacking nothing. She lacks nothing by virtue of the artefacts and technology with which she surrounds herself, in the manner of a woman producing and reproducing herself -- herself and her desire -- in a cycle or closed circuit. She lacks precisely that nothing (the form of the other?) which would undress her and deliver her of all this panoply. Madonna is desperately seeking a body able to generate illusion, a naked body costumed by its own appearance. She would like to be naked, but she never manages it. She is perpetually harnessed, if not by leather and metal, then by the obscene desire to be naked, by the artificial mannerism of exhibition. But this produces total inhibition and, for the

spectator, radical frigidity. So, paradoxically, she ends up personifying the frenetic frigidity of our age.

She can play all the roles. But is this because she enjoys a solid identity, a fantastic power of identification, or because she has none at all? Surely because she has none. But the trick is to know -- as she does -- how to exploit this fantastic absence of identity.

We know people who, for want of being able to communicate, are victims of profuse otherness (as we speak of profuse sweating). They play all the roles at once, their own and the other person's; they both give and return, ask the questions and supply the answers. They embrace the other's presence so fully that they no longer know the limits of their own. The other is merely a transitional object. The secondary gain from the loss of the other is an ability to transform oneself into anyone at all -- through role-playing, virtual and computer games, through that new spectrality Marc Guillaume speaks of, with the age of Virtual Reality still to come, when we shall don otherness like a data suit.

This whole movement of construction of an artificial double of the body and desire ends in the pornographic, the culmination of a henceforth desireless hyperbody, of a now indifferent and useless sexual function. But a function which works all the better in sex-processing, like text in word-processing, art in art-processing, war in war-processing, and so on. It is in this transparency, this charnel house of signs of the body disincarnate, that pornographic images move (it is, indeed, transparency itself that is pornographic, not the lascivious obscenity of the body): everything is presented to the gaze there with a kind of objective irony. Transgression, prohibitions, phantasies, censorship -- everything is presented as phallic `quotation'. It is the minimal illusion of sex: become cool, ironic and promotional, porn has definitely not gained anything in pagan innocence, but it has gained something in media insolence.

It is the pure form of sex which can no longer be said to be encumbered by the mystery of sexual difference, nor the figures of otherness attaching to it. The signs of masculine and feminine no longer function there as such (as they do in erotic art) but as something purely sexual, dispelling all ambiguity: sexual difference is suddenly realized in its objective, anatomical, technical form as a surgical mark. The pornographic is thus the model of a society where sexual difference and the difference between reality and the image both disappear at the same time, and all registers become eroticized as they fall into non-distinction and the confusion of genres. Thus, if it was possible for la Cicciolina to be elected a member of the Italian Parliament, this is because the political and the sexual, having become transpolitical and transsexual, meet in the same ironic indifference. This previously unthinkable achievement is the mark of the profound travestying of our culture. The state of prostitution is quite simply that of the total substitution of terms, sexes and categories one for another.

In reality there no longer is any identifiable pornography, because the essence of the pornographic has passed into things, into images, into all the techniques of the visual and the virtual -- all of which, in a way, deliver us from that collective phantasmagoria. We are doubtless merely play-acting obscenity, play-acting sexuality, as other societies play-act ideology, as Italian society, for example (though it is not the only one), play-acts power. Thus, in advertising, it is merely the comedy of the bared female body that is being played out. Hence the error of feminist recriminations: if this perpetual striptease and sexual blackmail were real, that would be unacceptable. Not morally unacceptable, but unacceptable because we would be exposed to pure

obscenity, that is to say, the naked truth, the mad pretension of things to express their truth (this is the nauseous secret of TV `reality shows'). Fortunately, we have not reached that point. The hyperreality of everything in our culture and the High Definition which underlines its obscenity are too glaring to be true. And so they protect us by their very excess.

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As for art, it is too superficial to be truly worthless. There must be some mystery to it. There must surely be some meaning to such a riot of sex and signs, but we can't see what it is. Perhaps this worthlessness, this meaninglessness, take on a sense when they are viewed from another world, from another angle, like objects in anamorphosis? In the unreality of porn, in the insignificance of images, in all the figures of simulation, there is an allegory running beneath the surface, an enigma lurking in it all like a negative image -- who knows? If everything becomes too obvious to be true, then there's still a chance for illusion. What lurks behind this moronic world? Another form of intelligence or a definitive lobotomy?

The dictatorship of images is, at any rate, an ironic dictatorship. Take Jeff Koons and la Cicciolina, and their erotic, allegorical, infantile, incestuous machine -- at Venice, they came together to mime their real coupling in front of the depiction of that coupling. Autoerotic confusion, new aphrodisiac mysticism, no more and no less carnal or provocative than the fluorescent or geometric erectility of Gilbert and George.

Obscenity may be sublime or grotesque, if it shatters the innocence of a natural world. But what can porn do in a world pornographied in advance? What can art do in a world simulated and travestied in advance? Except bring an added ironic value to appearances? Except tip a last paradoxical wink -- of sex laughing at itself in its most exact and hence most monstrous form, laughing at its own disappearance beneath its most artificial form?

What solution is there? There is no answer to this collective syndrome of a whole culture, this fascination, this mad whirl of denial of otherness, of all strangeness, all negativity, this repudiation of evil and reconciliation around the selfsame and its multiple figures: incest, autism, twinship, cloning. We can only remember that seduction resides in the safeguarding of alienness, in non-reconciliation. One

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should not be reconciled with one's body, nor with oneself, one should not be reconciled with the other, one should not be reconciled with nature, one should not reconcile male and female, nor good and evil. Therein lies the secret of a strange attraction.

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Note: 28. The French here, `*séduction blanche*', implies that the seduction is, like *un mariage blanc*, unconsummated.

Note: 29. Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), Portuguese modernist poet.

Note: 30. The words `Madonna Deconnection' are in English (?) in the original.